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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 002318

SIPDIS

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TAGS: NL VE PREL PGOV

SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/VENEZUELA: DUTCH WILL RAISE VENEZUELA

PROFILE IN EU

REF: A. A) SOBEL-BURNS E-MAIL

1B. 8/22/05

1C. B) THE HAGUE 2309

1D. C) THE HAGUE 2136 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CLIFFORD SOBEL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

11. (S) Summary. The Dutch are increasingly concerned about Venezuelan activities and see their engagement as a first step in putting these concerns on the EU's agenda. The Prime Minister and key members of his cabinet are seized with the issue and willing to elevate discussion within the EU. The working level remains skeptical that the EU can be moved in a more positive direction, and is worried about "provoking" Chavez. Further high-level consultations are needed to develop clear objectives and strategies for engaging Dutch and EU energies most effectively. End Summary.

12. (S) In a series of meetings with Ambassador Sobel and visiting WHA/AND Deputy Director Bruce Friedman on August 23 and 24, senior Dutch officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Justice, and the Prime Minister's Office reiterated Dutch concerns about growing Venezuelan interference in the Dutch Antilles, destabilizing Venezuelan activities in the region, and Chavez's undermining of civil society inside Venezuela. The Dutch made clear that they are committed to a "dialogue" with Chavez, with FM Bot planning to visit Caracas as part of a regional tour in October, and a possible visit by Prime Minister Balkenende in November. The Dutch intend to use this dialogue both to deliver critical messages to Chavez and to elevate the profile of their concerns regarding Venezuela within the EU. Hugo Siblesz (POLDIR, MFA) and Rob Swartbol (Senior Foreign Affairs advisor to the PM) separately confirmed that the Dutch hope to get Venezuela on the agenda of upcoming GAERC and EU Council meetings, using the Dutch visits as a trigger. Ambassador Sobel and Friedman stressed that Chavez has a history of misrepresenting his contacts with European leaders to his advantage; Siblesz made clear that the Dutch were aware of this problem and would consider how best to avoid this outcome.

13. (S) In response to Friedman's remark that the U.S. did not truly appreciate the nature of Chavez' ambitions in the first few years of his regime, Swartbol opined that the Dutch are only now starting to grasp the problem, and the rest of the EU remains asleep at the switch. He noted that the Dutch cabinet has only in the last few months begun to consider as a whole the implications of Venezuelan meddling in the upcoming Antillean elections. But, he added, the Prime Minister is now seized with the issue, and is supported by Foreign Minister Bot, Defense Minister Kamp, and Kingdom Affairs Minister Pechtold.

4 (S) Minister of Justice Donner, who will visit Venezuela and Colombia next week, told Ambassador Sobel and Friedman that the Dutch want to increase counter-narcotics cooperation with Venezuela but are concerned about Chavez's recent severing of ties with DEA and other steps suggesting a lack of commitment in countering narcotics trafficking. He, and other senior Dutch officials, are also looking at ways to increase assistance to Colombia and other at-risk regional states, and would be willing to consider U.S. proposals on how to do this most effectively (for example, by providing support for the demobilization of paramilitaries.)

15. (S) Although the Dutch are prepared to elevate discussion of Venezuela to the ministerial level at the EU, it is also clear serious concerns remain at the working level about how forceful the EU will be in addressing the issue. Marion Kappeyne de Coppello (Head of the MFA's Western Hemisphere Department), stressed that getting the EU to take a tougher line would be "difficult" given the economic interests of several EU states in Venezuela, and also warned against "provoking" Venezuela by gestures such as U.S. ship visits to the Antilles. (Ambassador Sobel countered that the EU's economic interests in Venezuela also provided leverage to influence Chavez's behavior, and noted that Antillean PM Ijs clearly supported the ship visits.)

16. (S) British Ambassador Sir Colin Budd similarly stressed that getting the EU to take a more forceful interest in

Venezuela would be difficult. The issue was simply "not on the radar screen" of most EU members -- including the British presidency. Given the resistance of the working level to address the issue, he stressed, a high-level approach to the British Presidency would be necessary to get London's attention; he suggested approaching Ambassador David Manning or POLDIR John Sawers at the P level would be a good place to start. Even with the UK and Dutch on board, however, moving the EU in a more positive direction would require a "critical mass" of at least 4-7 "important members" (Note: Both Budd and Kappeyne de Coppello made clear they did not consider the ten new EU members to be "important" in this regard.) Budd was doubtful that many states would have the stomach to challenge Spain on a Latin American issue, although he acknowledged that the Caribbean interests of the UK, Netherlands, and France gave them a certain amount of weight.

He added that those opposed to taking a tough line on Venezuela were aided by apparent discrepancies in U.S. evaluations of the threat (i.e., whether or not a "smoking gun" linking Chavez to FARC arms supplies exists) and general doubts about the quality of U.S. intelligence in the wake of Iraq.

CONCLUSION:

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17. (S) The Dutch are increasingly focused on Venezuela and see their dialogue with Caracas as the best mechanism for raising the profile of their concerns within the EU. While they understand that Chavez will seek to "pocket" any European contacts to his advantage, they see no alternative to engagement. Given this fact, we should continue to consult and work with the Dutch to ensure that their engagement helps shift Dutch and EU policies in more favorable directions, including helping to develop consistent EU policies on arms sales to Venezuela, containing Chavez' negative influences in the region, and promoting the growth of democratic institutions in Venezuela. In this regard, the Dutch -- and EU generally -- are much more likely to respond to a "positive" agenda focused on shoring up pro-democracy forces in the region through education and other assistance programs, and countering narcotics trafficking, than on an overtly confrontational approach. The Dutch can be very useful in helping us define a set of specific achievable objectives for the EU, and in developing a strategy for building core groups within the EU to heighten awareness of the problem and enhance constructive engagement.

SOBEL